

MEDIASCENE

SPECIAL: 50th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE!

★ PREVIEW

JAN

TODAY'S PERSONALITIES & TOMORROW'S ENTERTAINMENT

\$2.95
CANADA \$3.50

A SUPER CELEBRATION WITH

SYLVESTER STALLONE

DAN AYKROYD

BESS ARMSTRONG

TOM SELLECK

NICK NOLTE

EDDIE MURPHY

DARTH VADER

BRUCE BOXLEITNER

MICHAEL PALIN

ARMAND ASSANTE

RALPH BAKSHI

FRANK FRAZETTA

JIM HENSON

THE GO-GOs

AND

JOAN COLLINS

DYNASTY'S SULTRY SURVIVOR

PLUS PREVIEW PERSONALITIES
FROM THE PAST 50 ISSUES

FILM PREVIEW 28 **THE DARK CRYSTAL:** Beyond the Muppets, Jim Henson finds a fantastic universe



A



B



C

FILM PREVIEW BY JOHN SAYERS

Once upon a time, in an alien world far beyond our own, there lived beings of great wisdom and virtue. They dwelt in a grand castle on the shores of a sea of sand beneath skies warmed by the light of three suns. Theirs was a land of beauty and abundance and good.

Then, as all things must, they went away, leaving only *The Dark Crystal* and its power to mark their mysterious passing. A bleak shadow fell upon the world and it knew evil.

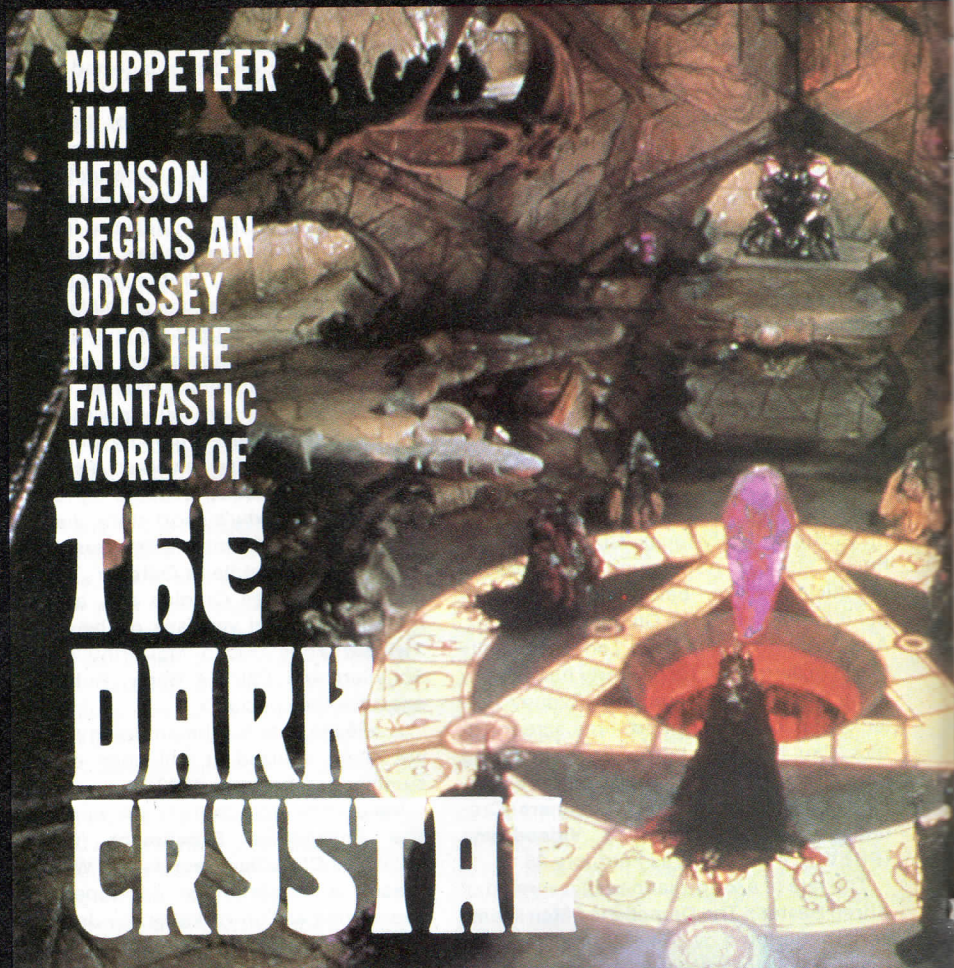
The reign of the reptilian race of the Skekses began. They occupied the deserted castle. They claimed *The Dark Crystal* for their own and used its arcane secrets to corrupt, to destroy, to enslave. Those who opposed the wicked reptiles died.

Not even the ancient prophecy, that the small creatures known as Gelflings would shatter the lizards' rule, could stop them because the Skekses had reaped the crimson whirlwind and slaughtered the Gelf race.

But, somewhere, the youngster Jen still lived.

He was a Gelfling.

"It was difficult to talk about this movie before Yoda and E.T. came along," Jim Henson says in a voice which faintly recalls his most well-known character, Kermit the



D

MUPPETEER JIM HENSON BEGINS AN ODYSSEY INTO THE FANTASTIC WORLD OF THE DARK CRYSTAL

Frog. But, the Muppetmeister's latest project is not populated with wise-cracking creatures; the denizens of his epic fantasy *The Dark Crystal* are an entirely new form of Muppet life.

"After Yoda, the world knows what these things are—and they are *not* Muppets. Some people might call them puppets, but I think of puppetry on a more symbolic level—it's more of a cartoon-type of performing. Unusual as they are, the characters in *The Dark Crystal* seem more realistic and alive than anything we've ever done in the past."

Bestowing the magic of movement on inanimate objects made of fabric and foam has been a lifelong adventure for the 46-year-old performer/writer/director. Since he began with a five-minute-long local TV show featuring *Sam and Friends* in 1954, Henson and his Muppets have delighted audiences worldwide. Early appearances by Rowlf the Dog, Kermit, Big Bird and company enlivened *The Jimmy Dean Show*, *Sesame Street* and *Saturday Night Live*. Later, joined by Miss Piggy and others, they earned their own Emmy-winning syndicated TV series, *The Muppet Show*, and spawned a merchandising empire. There have been two motion pictures, hit records, a comic strip, lucrative commercials—and always, new Muppet characters.

Most have been friendly, googly-eyed varmints—chickens, otters, cattle, surly humans, monsters of indeterminate origin—until now. With this latest flight into fantasy, Jim Henson, Kermit's best friend, puts down the green gagster to become Jen, a Gelfling champion of justice in a bizarre world of four-armed wizards and conqueror reptiles.

"There's quite a change," Henson says, "not just in characters, but attitudes. Kermit doesn't look anything like a real frog, just as Mickey doesn't resemble a real mouse. It's funny how these very stylized representations have been accepted. In *The Dark Crystal*, we're breaking away from stylization and caricature with realistic creatures unlike anything ever seen before.

"Jen, the hero, is probably the most human-like being in the film, and it took us quite some time to achieve that degree of realism. We've also tried to create a bridge of identification between our audiences and an entirely alien world. Of course, we could have done the same thing by using live actors, but our goal was to create a new universe from scratch. We found it took considerably longer than seven days.

"It all began during a conversation about five years ago, before *The Muppet Movie*. My oldest daughter, Lisa, and I were just talking about doing a full-length feature fantasy in a fairy tale setting. The idea was



to use a type of realism that our performers had never attempted.

"We had dabbled in realistic heads with Scred, Ploobis and Peuta, the characters that we did for **Saturday Night Live** in 1975. They had taxidermists' eyes, as opposed to the regular Muppet-style variety—a white disc with a black dot. They made a striking difference. Take a friendly Muppet and replace his cartoon eyes with very realistic glass ones, and you get a *living* creature—something that really looks alive and breathing. That eerie effect triggered us in another direction, towards an entirely new world."

And the world was dying, caught in the malignant stranglehold of the sinister Skekses.

Far away, in a valley still untainted by their evil, there dwelt a race of sad-eyed sorcerers. These were the Ur-Ru, magicians, hermits and protectors of the Gelfling orphan Jen. He served an Ur-Ru Master, learning something of the ways of wizardry as he ripened and grew.

And there came a time that the Master lay dying and summoned he, Jen to his side to be charged with a final task. Young Jen must leave the valley to quest afar.

Embarking on this journey into the unknown, the youth consulted the learned

enchantress Aughra for guidance, and soon he met the tiny Podling peasants and the Gelfling orphan they had raised.

Her name was Kira.

Together, the two set out on a quest. They must restore the missing shard to The Dark Crystal before the three suns converge and destroy all things good and beautiful, leaving forevermore only evil and decay.

The next step on the long journey to **The Dark Crystal** came in England where Henson was taping **The Muppet Show**. He was enchanted by the work of Brian Froud, a young British artist then illustrating **Faeries**, a fantasy book (previewed in **MEDIASCENE** 34).

"His art excited me," the bearded director recalls. "When we got together, I saw some **Faeries** drawings as he was doing them. His work is very much in the style of Victorian fairy tale illustrators like Arthur Rackham. It was just the atmosphere I wanted for the film."

Henson offered the British artist a staggering creative challenge: the opportunity to envision an entire planet, from its inhabitants—both plant and animal—to its landscape—dwellings, deserts, mountains, seas. Froud agreed to be the visual architect of **The Dark Crystal** universe.

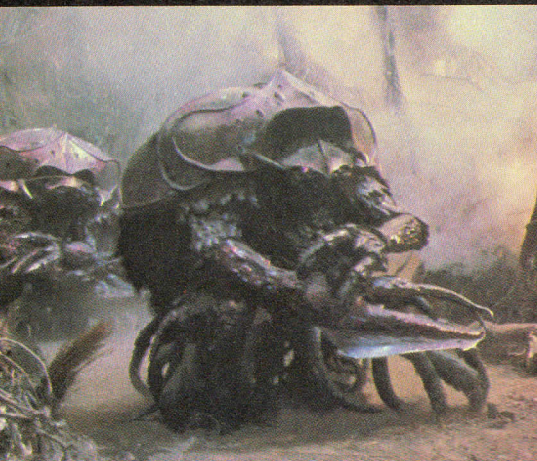
"It takes a while to get to know Brian," Henson explains. "He is *not* a terribly talka-

tive person. After we had our initial conversation, he wasn't sure that I actually realized how *much* he loved the project. So, three days later, he handed me a gorgeous painting, saying, 'I want you to know that I'm *serious* about this project.' It was a special way of accepting the challenge."

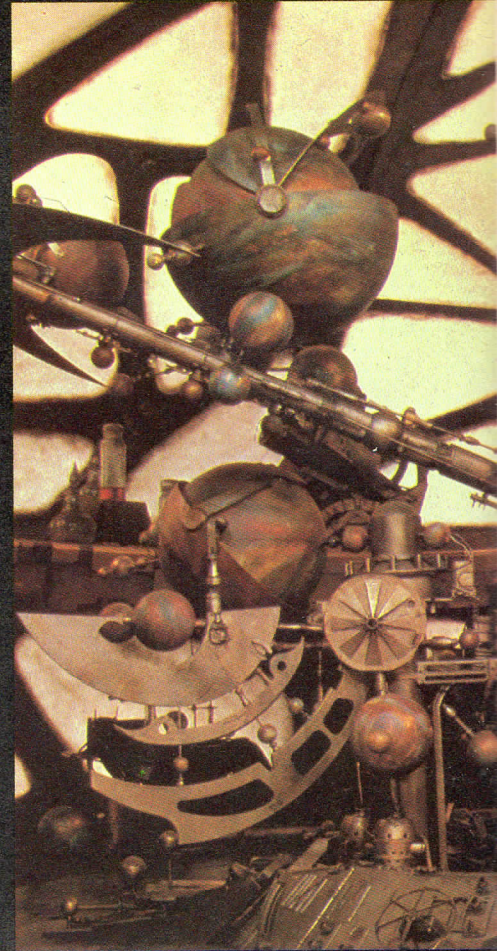
For the next three years, Froud designed the film's fanciful characters and strange environments in a series of drawings, paintings and three-dimensional clay models. Although trained as an illustrator and accustomed to working in the quiet solitude of his Devon studio, he soon found himself heading a busy shop of artists and craftsmen dedicated to executing his imaginative concepts. Eventually, production designer Harry (2001: **A Space Odyssey**) Lange supervised ten separate crews—each concentrating on a different species of character—to translate ideas developed by Froud and the Muppet designers into reality.

"The Skekses were the first creatures we developed," Henson reveals. "Our initial idea concerned a castle governed by evil characters of *some* sort. I'd seen a fascinating illustration in a Lewis Carroll book of alligator-like animals in a beautiful room, all dressed in magnificent ornate robes. I liked the juxtaposition, and that villainous image became a part of our concept.

"During the early stages, all of us—about



PHOTOS: Previous page: **A)** Jen is given the quest by his master. **B)** Jen and Kira. **C)** Weaver of the Mystic Ur-Ru. **D)** Power rejuvenation ceremony in the Crystal Chamber. **E)** Chamberlain attempts to steal the sceptre from the Skekses Emperor. **F)** Jen and Urzah in the Mystic Valley. This page: **G)** The Garthim. **H)** Urzah. **I)** Chamberlain. **J)** Aughra's alchemy laboratory. **K)** Kira the Gelfling. **L)** Kira and Jen. **M)** Aughra the Wizardess. **N)** Skekses Ritual Master.



© 1982 ITC Entertainment, Ltd.

a dozen artists and craftsmen—would discuss each area of the project. That was the exciting part—when building a fantasy world, you start absolutely *fresh*: what was its history? How did the life forms move? What did they eat? What did they think, and why? A story began to evolve quite naturally. Certain things do seem to dictate themselves. I worked out the main storyline, but it was mostly a group effort.

"When I finally had a plot, we were still working on **The Muppet Show**. I was flying to and from London regularly. It was quite a busy time in my life. I remember saying to an associate, 'I have to get away from everything for a few days to get the film's story down on paper.' I had it all in my head, but I just needed time to concentrate on it.

"It was February, 1977, and my second daughter, Cheryl, and I were on our way to London. We were ready to get on the plane when the Great Blizzard of '77 hit. The snow kept falling, and the airport closed. We couldn't even get back to New York City, ended up *trapped* in a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge for three days. It was wonderful! Cheryl and I finally found the time to write the storyline."

After the initial 20-page synopsis took shape, other Muppet vets joined the project, including Frank Oz, the human force behind Jedi Master Yoda, Fozzie Bear, Cookie Monster and the prima donna of pork—Miss

Piggy (see Oz interview in **PREVUE** 43). Henson and Oz decided to co-direct the film. Writer David Odell, who worked on **The Muppet Show** and **Movie**, began transforming the storyline into a full-fledged screenplay. Construction of the experimental character prototypes also commenced.

"It's fortunate that the project took five years to complete," Henson says. "During the first two Muppet movies, we solved many of the technological problems that filming **The Dark Crystal** would present. We had already developed the radio-control work to a high degree *before* we started shooting. Also, we assembled a fine technical crew for **The Great Muppet Capers**, and most of them continued on to this film."

In addition, **The Dark Crystal** boasts an immigrant from a galaxy far, far away: **Star Wars** producer Gary Kurtz. He originally contacted Henson for Muppet assistance in developing Yoda for **The Empire Strikes Back**, and agreed to provide his expertise on computer, electronic and matte painting fx when asked to co-produce Henson's \$20 million mythic fantasy. Make-up legend Dick (**The Exorcist**) Smith also served as a consultant during initial planning stages. Smith and his assistants often create elaborate foam latex costume pieces to alter actors' faces, such as aging Dustin Hoffman in **Little Big Man**. In this film, however, the actors' faces are literally made out of foam

latex.

"Actually, every character in **The Dark Crystal** is a special effect," Henson says. "They are a great deal more complicated than the standard Muppet. Besides the basic puppetry and performance techniques we've always used, new concepts came into play—multiple manipulators, radio-controlled mechanisms, cable work, the use of midgets for certain long shots—both singularly and in various combinations. When it comes to getting the shots I want, I am *not* a puppet purist. I believe in using *anything* that works."

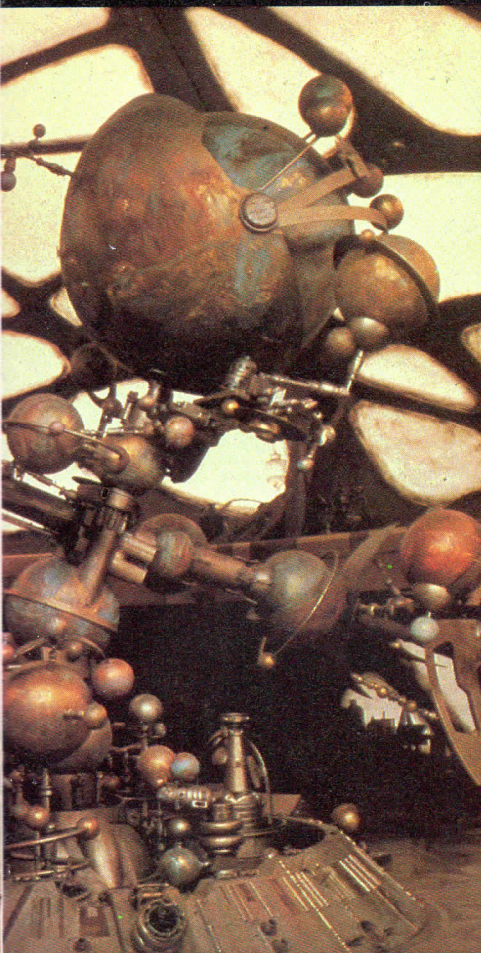
There was death along the way. It lurked in the shadows, awaiting Jen and Kira.

The Skekses had learned of the quest and they shuddered to think that the ancient prophecy might be fulfilled and their reign brought low by Gelfling hand. And the lizards dispatched their warrior underlings, the fierce Garthim, crab-like assassins who dealt death without mercy.

The Gelflings and those who might aid them must be destroyed.

But there was a faint glow of hope, for did not the Chamberlain, himself, enigmatic leader of the Skekses, venture alone into the gloomy forest? And there, he met with Jen and Kira and talked with them and offered them life and peace and compassion.

And it was a bargain to consider as they



came to the grand castle of the Skekses and its sacred chamber where stood *The Dark Crystal*.

Lensing of *The Dark Crystal* finally got underway at London's Elstree Studios in April, 1981. Though blessed with a 19-week schedule, it seemed as if the real work on the project had just begun. Henson explains: "We had to *unlearn* a great deal of puppetry and Muppetry for the film. It became a matter of toning down and being more subtle. As opposed to television—where grand gestures are necessary to be noticed—the film camera captures everything. The tiniest movement becomes enormous on the big screen; even simple things, like keeping your hand steady, can be difficult. All phases of performance must become more subtle. Fortunately, Frank and I co-directed so we could keep an eye on each other and spot any problems.

"It certainly wasn't easy work. The most impossible task was shooting a very large, climactic scene with 18 characters on the set. Most were operated by a performer and a team of assistants, thinking and working as one. Some rather uncomfortable characters required two dressers each as well. That's a lot of people; the logistics were extremely complicated. We had about 20 video monitors in use so the manipulators could watch what they were doing, plus special effects, smoke and dry ice. And I

PREVUE

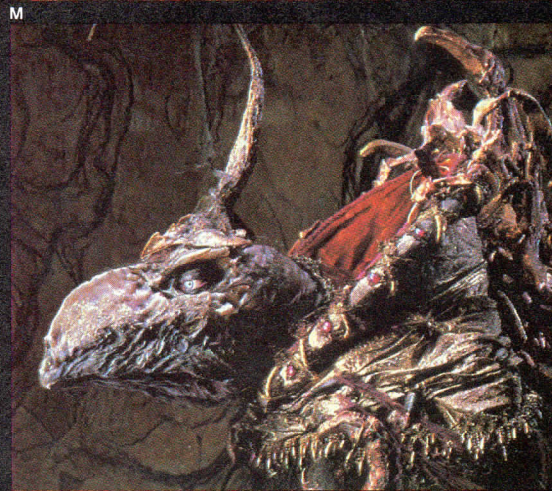


was trying to perform and co-direct through all of that! The sequence took almost *four weeks* to complete. It lasts about *three minutes* on the screen."

The Dark Crystal is a film without humans. Its menagerie of characters are all full-size creations—some with as many as 16 different expressions—manipulated by Muppeteers Steve Whitmire, Louise Gold, Brian Muehl, Bob Payne and others. Henson operates Jen, Kathy Mullen performs Kira and Frank Oz essays both Aughra and the Chamberlain. The familiar *Muppet Show* voices, however, will be missing from the soundtrack; instead, veteran actors have provided the vocal characterizations.

The movie's Tolkienesque universe also includes an imaginative assortment of other creatures: Landstriders, eight-foot-tall, stilt-legged beings; black bugs, small wind-up toys conveniently converted into strange insectoids by the addition of ebony feathers; and some living vegetation quite unlike the usual garden variety. The most popular is likely to be Kira's pet, Fizzgig. The character, devised by Frank Oz but performed by David (The Great Gonzo) Goetz, is described by Henson as a "fur coat with eyes and the general disposition of a terrier."

Jen, Kira, Fizzgig and their friends and foes will materialize on store shelves—in merchandise form—just before Christmas. The actual working models, some weighing



more than 75 pounds, are now on display at special museum exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles and London, celebrating the film's December 17 release.

Although Henson considers *The Dark Crystal* his "ultimate—for now—project," he is already at work on a new challenge, the inhabitants of *Fraggle Rock*, an HBO-TV series premiering in January 1983. "The shows—which we're now filming in Toronto, Canada—are children's programs designed for an international market," he says. "Each half-hour episode is a complete story, with Muppet-style characters. Unlike *The Dark Crystal* creatures, they are Muppets, but all newly-developed ones.

"*The Dark Crystal* is also complete in itself. I don't really see it as a movie which would produce a sequel, but, we *could* set another story in the same universe. We've talked vaguely about it, but I prefer to wait and to see what happens."

As a quiet man whose every waking moment concerns new projects, new stories and new characters, Henson has consolidated his position as America's Modern Geppetto. Curiously, he has never dreamed of Muppets, and the legion of creatures he and his associates have created.

Jim Henson smiles. "When one works with his fantasy every day, there's no need to dream. Those dreams are *already* reality." ★